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DARPA Outlines Plans for Grand Challenge at Competitors' Conference

Los Angeles, CA – More than 400 business executives, government and military leaders, scientists, researchers, and interested individuals gathered in Los Angeles on Saturday, February 22 to attend an introductory competitors' conference for the autonomous robotic ground vehicle challenge planned by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD).

Scheduled for March 2004, the DARPA Grand Challenge for autonomous robotic ground vehicles will cover a course of approximately 300 miles between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and the team that most quickly completes the route in less than the prescribed time will receive a cash prize of \$1 million. This challenge is intended to spur the accelerated development of autonomous robotic ground vehicle technology for military applications, and is the first in a series of Grand Challenges planned by DARPA. The competitors' conference offered potential participants and interested observers an opportunity to find out how they can get involved, meet other contestants, and explore teaming opportunities.

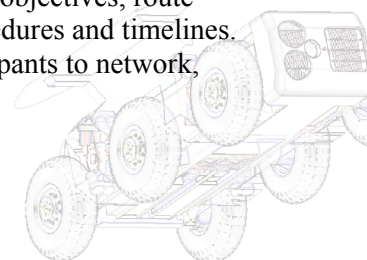
"The strong turnout at the competitors' conference is a tremendous step forward to ensure the success of the DARPA Grand Challenge, both for this one and others in the future," said DARPA Director Dr. Anthony J. Tether. "We are encouraged that so many committed, innovative organizations and people are interested in participating in this history-making program."

DARPA invited a wide range of potential participants to the conference, including advertisers and corporate sponsors, artificial intelligence developers, auto manufacturers and suppliers, computer programmers, futurists, inventors, motor sports enthusiasts, movie producers, off-road racers, remote-sensing developers, roboticists, science fiction writers, technology companies, universities, video game publishers, and other trailblazers. Organizations and individuals who attended the conference represented many of these fields.

"We attracted a diverse mix of disciplines and personalities, and that reflects the spirit of the Grand Challenge program," said Dr. Tether. "By bringing together leaders in business, defense, technology and academia with nontraditional partners in fields such as robotics, entertainment and off-road racing, we will develop synergies that foster new ways of thinking."

The competitors' conference started in the morning with a series of briefings by event organizers on various aspects of the Grand Challenge, including an introduction to DARPA, program overview and objectives, route description, rules and technical requirements, and entry procedures and timelines. After the briefings, a teaming forum allowed potential participants to network, exchange information and start building teams.

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“In order to make the DARPA Grand Challenge a success, we must maximize participation by everyone from major players to amateur enthusiasts,” said Col. Jose Negron, USAF, who is leading the Grand Challenge program for DARPA. “Starting with the teaming forum, we will do everything we can to facilitate team-building and information exchange so that everyone who is interested in participating has an equal opportunity.”

One area of particular interest to competitors’ conference attendees was the nature of the course, which will include a combination of off- and on-road terrain that will be cleared of interfering vehicles. The route is still being finalized, and to develop the course DARPA is drawing on the expertise of SCORE International, which has more than 30 years of experience successfully planning off-road vehicle events in California and Nevada.

“We have identified several options for routes between Los Angeles and Las Vegas that are feasible and meet all of the necessary regulations,” said Sal Fish, SCORE CEO/President, who is leading route development efforts. “Now we are working closely with the appropriate federal, state and local authorities to finalize a route that is not only safe and avoids environmentally protected areas, but will also make it an interesting challenge.”

DARPA Grand Challenge organizers will continue to share information and facilitate team building through a variety of outreach activities leading up to October 13, 2003, when applicants’ technical papers are due. The Grand Challenge web site – www.darpa.mil/grandchallenge – will serve as the gateway for updates on the event and a discussion forum for participants and interested observers.

DARPA is the central research and development organization for the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). The Agency manages and directs basic and applied research and development projects for DoD, and pursues research and technology where the risk and payoff are both very high and where success may provide dramatic advances for traditional military roles and missions.

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